

# The Boston Musical Intelligen

*a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston*

Lee Eiseman, publisher; Robert Levin, advisor; David Moran, assisting editor; Bettina A. Norton, emerita editor

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OCTOBER 12, 2015

## Singing, Chanting and Waltzing Into New Season

by CASHMAN KERR PRINCE



Guest conductor Joseph Flummerfelt

With innovative, centuries-spanning music under guest conductor Joseph Flummerfelt, Cantata Singers opened its 52<sup>nd</sup> season. Saturday night in Jordan Hall began with parallel settings of the same text: *O vos omnes*, drawn from the “Lamentations of Jeremiah” set both by Tomás Luis de Victoria and by Pablo Casals. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spaniard’s austere and beautiful polyphony was performed with limpid grace, reaching a very high standard. The second setting, by the famous Catalan, dates from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; lushly romantic in the vein of Brahms,

operatic in reach and scope, plaintively expressive of the despair in the words, this choral incarnation also features lusty poetry.

Parallelisms continued, this time with three 20<sup>th</sup>-century versions of the Lord’s Prayer. Peter Maxwell Davies’s declamatory version is filled with interesting tonalities and harmonies which serve to underscore the potent phrases. Maurice Duruflé’s *Notre père* vocally rendered the power of an organ in a cappella choral music with long lines and flowing sound, constituting an introspective act of piety in composition and in performance. Flummerfelt characterized Stravinsky’s *Pater noster* as “austere” but I heard more the lofty tradition of orthodox chanting. Verdi’s *Ave Maria* continued the exploration of religious music in a secular setting. While his *Requiem* is operatic, this choral song slowly unfolds as a seamlessly blended prayer set on a grand scale.

To round out the first half, Flummerfelt and the Cantata Singers turned to secular themes with a set of 20<sup>th</sup>-century part-songs. Britten’s “The Evening Primrose” is a small gem, not unlike its floral namesake. Setting a science-inflected meditation on the passage of time in the context of love, Irving Fine’s exquisite “The Hour-Glass” is a work I would happily hear over and over. Barber’s “The Coolin” is romantic and pastoral, earnest and playful. Pianists Eliko Akahori and Jenny Tang took the stage for songs by Copland: “Long Time Ago,” “At the River,” and “The Promise of Living.” These gorgeously innovative settings of familiar hymns make commonplace tunes vibrant.

The first half was a marvel of astute programming, not only the parallel renderings of texts but also the musical and harmonic interactions across works. Throughout, Cantata Singers responded to Flummerfelt’s easy direction with nuance, insight, and high technical fluency.

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Following intermission, pianists and singers offered Brahms's *Liebeslieder Walzer*, op. 52, and *Neue Liebeslieder Walzer*, op. 65 (Zum Schluß). What a delightfully wacky treat! My giddy take: "I know—I'll write a cycle of waltzes and have them narrate a love affair." If one heard only the piano parts, one would be transported to a Viennese ball. The texts could make for a commentary on the social dynamics, or even a lieder cycle. The intriguing combination and really seems to capture the Brahms's notion of serious. The 7<sup>th</sup> song, "Wohl schön bewandt", featured the dulcet voice of mezzo Jennifer Webb; the 17<sup>th</sup>, "Nicht vandle, mein Licht, dort außen," showcased tenor Michael Merullo's flexible and expressive voice in an affective reading of this sobworthy song. The two singers certainly endowed this inventive collection with memorable performances, as did all the Cantata Singers and ensemble. The promising start augurs w for the ensemble's continuing concert and chamber seasons.

**Cashman Kerr Prince, trained in Classics and Comparative Literature, is now a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Classical Studies at Wellesley College. He is also a cellist of some accomplishment, currently playing with the Brookline Symphony Orchestra.**

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